

4.21.08: College students protest budget cuts to higher education

College students protest budget cuts to higher education San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, April 21, 2008

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About 1,500 college students rallied at state Capitol this morning to protest \$1 billion in budget cuts that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is proposing for California's three college systems in the coming fiscal year.

Students from many UC, state university and community college campuses marched about a mile from Raley Field to the Capitol, where they heard from Lt. Gov John Garamendi and other speakers opposed to the governor's cuts to education. Similar protests were held at a half-dozen other locations up and down the state at the same time, from Los Angeles and San Diego in the south to Arcata in the north.

"Kick us out, we will vote you out," the crowd in Sacramento chanted as they walked along a bridge crossing Highway 99, through downtown and onto the Capital steps. The line of students, which included hundreds from the Bay Area, stretched six blocks, and dozens of motorists honked in support as they drove by.

The fears, voiced again and again, were that if Schwarzenegger's proposed funding cuts go through, students will end up paying more to attend, while reduced services and a narrower selection of classes.

The governor's proposed cuts to higher education are part of an across-the-board reduction in all state spending in response to a growing budget crisis caused by economic hard times statewide.

"They keep talking about us being the future of California, but if they keep cutting education there will be no future," said Tiffany Trujillo, a 22-year-old junior at San Francisco State University. "It seems like education is always the first thing they cut."

Trujillo said she is among many at San Francisco State who get financial aid and expect to graduate owing thousands of dollars in loans. Having to pay higher fees would severely impact her financially, she said.

Ai Ho, a 35-year-old student and San Francisco City College, carried a sign reading "Educate to Liberate" as he marched. He said he works in digital imaging and went back to school because, "I want to get a better job. Education is the way." If fees go up, he may have to drop out, he said.

Once the crowd reached the Capitol steps, they rallied and listened to speeches for about two hours, while nearby a separate rally rang with cries against proposed cuts in the state parks system.

Garamendi, a Democrat, reminded protesters that Ronald Reagan and Pete Wilson, the former conservative Republican governors, both raised taxes to fund education, something Schwarzenegger has flatly rejected. "Are we ready to reach back into history and do it once again?" Garamendi asked to rousing cheers. "We can, we must."

"Let's get real," the lieutenant governor added. "There is no more important investment than the investment in students. We will build roads, we will build trains, but the most important things to build are the minds of students."

State Sen. Don Perata, D-Oakland, also urged tax hikes.

"There is no way we can balance the budget this year without a tax increase," he said. "If we were to cut what the governor suggests, we will destroy the education system, and we are simply not going to do it."

One student from San Jose State, 24-year-old Joel Bridgeman, said raising the money for college was so tough that he was homeless - couch surfing - for about a year as he went to school.

"Most of the people who work in this building probably either went to CSU, UC or (community college), but as the next generation comes up they are looking for the easy solution," he said. "They are looking for what is going to get them re-elected. They say our voice doesn't matter, but I have a message for them... we are here to demand our chance."

Schwarzenegger and his top financial advisers have said the state's plummeting revenues means that all services, from education to state parks and health care programs, must suffer cuts to balance a budget gap that is likely to grow to \$14 billion - and possibly as high as \$16 billion - by June 2009. Budget negotiations are bound to become increasingly difficult as lawmakers haggle over what programs to cut and whether to use taxes and/or fees to increase revenue for the state.

The Republican governor and the Democrat-controlled Legislature took emergency actions in February that included additional borrowing, delaying debt payments and delaying cost-of-living increases for some welfare recipients to reduce the projected deficit to about \$8 billion.

But with the housing market meltdown continuing to wreak havoc in the slowing economy, many lawmakers believe the deficit will grow back to its predicted high during the fiscal year that begins on July 1.

In Los Angeles, the rally turnout was not as large as in Sacramento, but those who attended made their point loudly.

About 200 students from all three systems picketed the governor's office at Pershing Square, chanting slogans and slowing foot traffic on the sidewalk around lunchtime.

"We think it went amazing," said Jennifer Knox of the UC Students Association, one of several student groups that helped organize the rallies all over the state. "Our goal was to send the governor a clear message, and I think that's what happened."

Gregory Cendana, a senior at UCLA, said he and other Los Angeles protesters were acutely aware that as they were rallying, others were doing the same thing all over the state.

"We're talking about the future of California, and with the budget crisis going on, it only makes sense to invest in students who will give back to the economy and the state later on," he said.